

Why No Thesis?: A Rhetorical Analysis of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

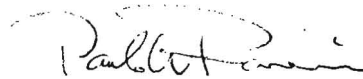
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Whittley Lewis

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Paul William Ranieri



Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

Frederick Douglass escaped slavery in his early adulthood and went on to pursue a career as a writer and public speaker. His autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* presents a powerful rhetorical argument against slavery, but presents several peculiarities. Most notably, Douglass states no clear thesis in the beginning of the text. He also omits any explicit call to action in the end. There is a tradition of literary analysis of this text, but as of yet, few authors have endeavored to use rhetorical analysis to answer the question: why no thesis? This rhetorical analysis considers Douglass' appeals to logos and pathos, as well as his use of enthymeme and presence to persuade an audience to adopt an abolitionist ideology.

Acknowledgements

In my senior AP English class, we read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and conducted several, small rhetorical analyses of Douglass' writing. These lessons in high school solidified my desire to be a Rhetoric and Writing Major—something I knew I wanted to pursue but would not be able to put a name to the major until I transferred colleges in my sophomore year. I give my many thanks to **Mrs. Lisa Lozano**, of Warren Central High School, Indianapolis. She inspired in me a healthy respect for good writing and a passion for pursuing knowledge.

I would also like to thank **Dr. Paul Ranieri** of Ball State University's Department of English for his patience and thoughtful input on this project. I found a mentor in my thesis advisor, and for that I am thankful. His guidance has been invaluable.

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Of course, many thanks go to my loving and supportive family and "the ladies of the back row."

Context

In 1841 a 23 year old¹ fugitive slave addressed the audience of a Nantucket anti-slavery meeting with a dramatic autobiography. The group was amazed with his speech and soon hired Frederick Douglass as a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (Alford, 86). Frederick Douglass, the son of a slave named Harriett Bailey and a white man (possibly his original owner, Captain Auld), had escaped slavery only three years prior to this first speaking engagement with the Massachusetts society. He would go on to speak across the region to audiences of abolitionists. His most renowned speech is known as the “Slaveholders Sermon,” a biting satire which points out the hypocrisy of slaveholding Christians in the American south (Alford, 87).

In addition to his speaking, Douglass was also known as a great writer; his works include *My Bondage and My Freedom*, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, “The Heroic Slave,” and his autobiography *Narrative of a Life of Frederick Douglass*, (referred to as *Narrative* in the rest of this essay). *Narrative* was originally published in 1845 by the Boston Anti-Slavery office (Carson, Notes). The publication was less than a decade after Douglass’ own escape from slavery (for which he was a wanted fugitive in Maryland) and years before slavery would be abolished. Under such circumstances, it was rather dangerous for Douglass to publish at all. However, Douglass’ writing and speaking went out largely to audiences of white abolitionists and those free persons who might not be familiar with the institution of slavery at all. In order to follow the eloquence and style of Douglass’ oratory and writing, the audience would have required some education, including multiple references to scripture and Christian culture.

¹ Because he was born a slave, no birth record exists to verify Douglass’ age. He was able to estimate his approximate birth year as 1818.

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, although titled as a narrative, is a strong rhetorical case against slavery. Douglass employs several techniques which allow him to make larger statements about humanity, while still telling the story of his own life. He balances these two agendas in one text, all while still being able to avoid negative attention from the white authorities. In other areas of his life Douglass demonstrated control and judgment by diminishing his role as a black man in a segregated society only so long as it benefited him and maintained his own low profile, but then speaking out and making bold moves whenever the timing was right. Indeed, Douglass' control of the rhetorical concept of *kairos*² is evident in many of the life choices he illustrates in this book, as well as his actual release and printing of the book itself.

Creative nonfiction writing such as what Douglass compiles in *Narrative*, dates back to such philosophical writings as that of St. Augustine and his original memoir. Montaigne's *The Self* further shaped the genre. However, the idea of a nonfiction novel and the popularization of memoir did not fully take shape until the 1960's with the New Journalists and then the 1990's with a boom in memoir sales. Elements of this genre, according to Root and Steinberg, are personal presence, self discovery, veracity, literacy, and flexible form. The striking thing about Douglass' work is not just the literacy or storytelling, but also the veracity; Douglass presents multiple, horrible truths about slavery and confronts his audience with these facts. *Narrative* is not just written to help Douglass sort out his own life, but rather to bring to light these facts to audiences of slave holders, other literate slaves, and people philosophically against, yet completely unaccustomed with 'slave holding life'. Phillip Lopate goes on to say about Creative

² Kairos is a Greek word referring to timing. According to Herrick, it is "the belief that truth is relative to circumstances" (Herrick, 45), although Ranieri defines it more as a "dynamic recognition of the appropriate moment for speaking or action" (Ranieri).

Nonfiction Writing, that it creates an intimacy between author and audience and that it is to be educational for both writer and audience. The writer is to offer a risky level of vulnerability by delving deeper into his or her personal experience than he or she might without writing. The audience is to recognize contradictions and complications of the writing as illustrations of a complicated human condition in general, according to Lopate.

Along this vein, several literary criticisms of *Narrative* have attempted to shed light on its literary nature, including: Untitled Review, Tim Youngs, *Journal of American Studies*, 1993; Untitled Review, John M. Reilly, *MELUS*, 1994; "Reading Frederick Douglass through Foucault's Panoptic Lens: A Proposal for Teaching Close Reading," J.C.B. Axelrod, *Pacific Coast Philology*, 2004; "Politicizing the Personal: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and Some Thoughts on the Limits of Critical Literacy," Timothy Barnett, *College English*, 2006; "'While I am Writing': Webster's 1825 Spelling Book, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass's Positioning of Language," Daneen Wardup, *African American Review*, 1998; "American Literature and the New Historicism: The Example of Frederick Douglass," Gregory S. Jay, *Boundary 2*, 1990; "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Invisibility, Race, and Homoeroticism from Frederick Douglass to E. Lynn Harris," Michael Hardin, *The Southern Literary Journal*, 2004; and "A Comment on Politicizing the Personal: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and Some thoughts on the Limits of Critical Literacy," Donald C. Jones, *College English*, 2007. However, with all of these literary criticisms, I could only find one rhetorical analysis in my research. Sharon Carson's work, "Shaking the Foundation: Liberation Theology in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*" analyzes Douglass' rhetorical strategy throughout his narrative and attempts to provide answers to questions raised about Douglass' open-ended call to action in the conclusion of his book. For Carson, Douglass does not explicitly ask the audience to act because

he believes that God will provide the action (Carson, 25). While my conclusion is somewhat different, Carson's steps of analysis prove useful as a model to examine the rhetorical strategies used in *Narrative*.

Framing Douglass' Argument

Several parts of Frederick Douglass' argument initially appear odd. First, the book has no stated thesis. Second, Douglass never states explicitly that slavery should be abolished. Finally, the conclusion is open ended. Douglass leaves interpretation up to the audience; instead of neatly concluding his narrative with a decisive call to action, the facts are left to linger with the audience. Because Douglass proves elsewhere in his book that he has a superior control of language, I believe that none of these oddities are coincidence, but rather working pieces to the larger rhetorical strategy of Douglass' writing.

Douglass' book begins by establishing his own sense of personal history. Rather than stating a thesis, he jumps right into telling the facts about his birth. His sense of personal history is decidedly different from that of most of his readers; where most people in the civilized world are able to give numbers and dates, Douglass can only tell us about places and people. He tells us that for most slaves, the only birthday they know of is "planting time, harvest time, cherry time, spring time, or fall time" (1). All of these "dates" are related directly to the earth and not to a manmade calendar. Douglass goes on to say that "white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege" (1). Most of Douglass' audience members also have the privilege of knowing their own birth dates. This is the first of many characteristics of slavery that Douglass illustrates: slaves are treated less like humans and more like animals, and rather than enjoying an education in abstract thought, they must stick to

organic, tangible facts to make sense of their world. While knowing one's own birth date is a thing generally taken for granted, Douglass illustrates how even this simple piece of data is a part of privilege; people who have knowledge of dates have knowledge of history and other forms of more elevated thought. Slaves are, however, denied the access to knowledge of even simple pieces of data, such as dates. In this way, slaves are also denied access to the knowledge tools made generally available to the rest of the free men and women in America; they are treated as something other than typical men and women. I argue that this lack of access to knowledge is the first step in relegating slaves to a status more that of an animal than that of a human being.

Appeals to Logos

Use of Antithesis

Using the narrative style, Douglass works in several vivid accounts of slave life in order to make the “dehumanizing character of slavery” visually and logically apparent to his readers (9). First, there is a catalog of antithetical ideas on page 2. He juxtaposes the white children's use of numbers for their ages with the black children's use of seasons to gauge their own ages (2). Next, Douglass writes of how he was sold to another farm in order to destroy natural attachment in contrast with the way other children are allowed to form an attached bond with their mothers (2). Slave children “follow the condition of their mothers” even in a patriarchal society, meaning that a baby born of a slave and her master is to be treated as a slave (2). If there is a bi-racial child, the mistress of the plantation has disdain for them, as Douglass writes, “they can seldom do anything to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash...” (2-3). Finally, in contrast to fathers keeping their sons close in order to protect them, Douglass suggests that a slave holder selling his own biracial son to another farm is more

humane than keeping him (3). This whole catalog of contrasting ideas demonstrates the stark difference between what is considered natural and human with what is considered appropriate treatment for a slave. Given that most of his readers are probably free, white people, who enjoy accessibility to elementary education and familial bonds, that these seemingly basic rights are denied to the slaves should come off as shocking.

Douglass cites free people's mistaking of field songs as one of the greatest misconceptions about the condition of slaves. Where people might expect that singing in the fields is evidence of happy, carefree slaves, Douglass has quite the opposite expectation. "The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart," Douglass writes (9). Singing was perhaps the only means through which slaves could express their sorrow without being punished for disapproving of their condition. If a slave spoke out against his master, he could be beaten. Even if he were to admit his mistreatment to another slave, or another free man for that matter, his confidence could be betrayed because slaveholders sometimes offered rewards for turning in an ungrateful slave.

Slaves were not only to be treated as second class people, but furthermore to be regarded as animals. Children were fed in the same manner as swine. When time came to give rations to the children too young to work, Colonel Lloyd, the plantation master would have coarse corn meal boiled and dropped in a wooden trough for the children to fight over. They were not given utensils or bowls, and they were not given enough food to share. Because they were treated like animals, they had to behave like animals to survive: "he that ate fastest got the most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied." (16). The children were not the only ones treated like pigs. Mary, a 14 year old city slave was never fed enough in her home in Baltimore and had to contend "with the pigs for offal thrown into the street" (21). Offal is the

collective name for organs and discarded scraps left over after an animal is butchered. When it was time for a slave to be sold to a new owner, they were lumped in with all sorts of livestock and farm animals; Douglass describes one such auction where “horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children” were offered up in groups on the auction block (27).

In order to emphasize the degradation of the slave’s plight, slave holders also referred to their slaves as “chattel,” or property, and “black gip” and “pecked,” to refer to the craggy nature of their cut-up backs and heads after being beaten, rather than by their own names (21-22). For any slave to endure this kind of treatment without revolt, his spirit and intellect both had to be broken. Douglass explains, “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. [...] he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man” (58-9). For the institution of slavery to work at all, it seems, the slave must be stripped of his or her basic humanity.

Even in death, slaves were not to be treated as kindly as others who were sick and dying.

Douglass writes of a time when he himself was sick in the field and instead of granting allowance for rest, his overseer kicked Douglass until he bled and ordered him back to work.

When Douglass’s Great Grandmother is near death, she is sent to die in a shack in the woods on her own, with no food, medicine, or other provisions. Douglass describes her chilling last moments as the following, “She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies” and there is no one to wipe away the cold death sweat or even perform a proper burial (29).

In contrast, when Master Andrew died, Great Grandmother was there and “wiped from his icy brow the cold death sweat, and closed his eyes forever” (28). Not only is the slave holder accompanied in his last moments, but he also has someone assigned to respectfully handle his

body after he dies. Great Grandmother had neither of these comforts and is left to rot on the earthen floor of her shack. The gruesome contrast is disheartening to say the least.

Slavery, Douglass argues, has a dehumanizing nature not just on the enslaved, but also on the slave masters. He gives an account of slavery's effect on Mrs. Auld, a white woman from Baltimore who had never been a part of the institution of slavery until in her marriage. Her husband gained control of Douglass through a will. She unwittingly partook in what Douglass calls the "fatal poison of irresponsible power" and he goes on to explain how Mrs. Auld was transformed: "That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon." (19). At first, Mrs. Auld saw fit to treat Douglass as she would any other human being in her care. She is described as kind and thoughtful. She attempts to educate him in the basics of reading and writing. Once Mr. Auld, who is already familiar with slavery, discovers Mrs. Auld's attempt at education, he is enraged and demands that the lessons be put to an end, explaining that any educated slave will be "spoiled" from all that he is worth as a work instrument (20). He instructs his wife to harden her heart against the idea of treating slaves as anything other working property. When describing the effects that this relationship had on his mistress, Douglass writes, "slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me" (22).

Free men and women felt social pressures outside the home that discouraged humane treatment of slaves as well. Even to refer to slaves as human was socially frowned upon. As the Aulds understood it, "to treat [Douglass] as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so" (22). There could be repercussions socially and the consequences of an educated slave could mean that he would become "unmanageable." Furthermore, "the slightest manifestation of humanity toward a colored person was denounced as abolitionism" amongst other free people

(58). Abolitionist status was dangerous for any free person who wanted to maintain respect in the community.

Paradoxes and Inconsistencies

In addition to establishing slavery as 'dehumanizing' Douglass points out many paradoxes and inconsistencies in the institution of slavery. Where the dehumanizing aspects depict slavery as cruel and appeal also to the pathos of his audience, Douglass uses inconsistencies as a direct appeal to logos. In other words, he shows his audience why slavery feels bad and then he explains why slavery itself does not make sense.

For the first of these paradoxes, Douglass expresses how much he wished to be sold away from his family (17). While it may seem normal to hear such a wish come from angst-ridden teenagers, it does not make sense that a child, born into slavery, would will anything that would separate him from his only family. Children belong with their mothers and siblings. Familial comforts might make slavery more tolerable than going it alone. However, Douglass was the son of a slave woman and a slave-owner man; he was punished by the plantation's mistress for being the product of adultery. In addition, slave children were not raised by their mothers to begin with—young mothers could still perform manual labor, so child rearing was left to one elderly woman who tended to all of the babies and toddlers on the farm. For Douglass, being sold would mean the end of persecution by the plantation mistress and the opportunity to live under a better master.

An extended example of this sort of inconsistency has to do with the Christmas break that is allotted to slaves. Douglass suggests that slaveholders regard it as "disgrace not to get [slaves] drunk on Christmas" (44). Slaveholders would rather see their slaves drink, box, and sleep over their break than anything else. In instances where slaves would take advantage of their break to

get caught up on chores such as mending clothing or making brooms and straw mats, they were scolded for not having worked hard enough during the rest of the year. If the slaves did not drink to drunkenness, they were scolded because obviously they did not have enough foresight to secure enough liquor for the whole holiday. The most egregious offence was for slaves to start a school or try to educate one another during breaks. This type of behavior was not only scolded, but harshly punished with beatings. It would make sense that slaveholders might not even give a break for the holidays. It would also make sense if they gave such a break but did not mind what the slaves did with their time. On the surface, it does not make sense that slaveholders would want the slaves to get drunk and fight one another; after all if the slaves are property, they should not damage one another.

However, the purpose Douglass gives for this type of expectation over the Christmas to New Year's holiday is that masters want to "disgust their slaves with freedom" (45). This way, slaves felt they had been free for a few days and the hangovers and bruises they would incur over a little less than a week's time would be enough to convince them that all of freedom must be this way. To ensure the negative experience, some slaveholders would go so far as to bet on which slave could drink the most whiskey without getting drunk, therefore coercing slaves to drink more than they might on their own (45). One would not expect to be disgusted with liberty or freedom, because we think of those things as intrinsically good, but in this case, both are meant to be disgusting for the slaves.

The 'treats' afforded to slaves also seem inconsistent with readers' own expectations. The slaves considered permission not to get up at sunrise as a treat (1). Masters also told their slaves that running extra errands to the Great House Farm, even though these were to be completed in addition to all the slave's regular responsibilities, was a sort of honor (7). Douglass

also cites that washing himself in the river when he was 8 years old was extremely exciting and he was “working for the first time with the hope of reward”; it was a treat both because he was able to be clean and because he had hope of reward (17). His reward, in the bathing case, was a new pair of trousers to wear in front of his new master. The city symbolizes such hope that even seeing Baltimore constitutes a treat for Douglass (5). City slaves are allotted more comfort and freedom—by freedom I mean responsibility to complete tasks without an overseer—than their rural counterparts, and in fact, Douglass writes, “A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation” (21). City slaves had “privileges” including clean clothing, enough food to eat, enough time to eat it, and private rather than public beatings (21). None of these treats taken by themselves are remarkable, and indeed they are often taken for granted by free people. For a slave, however, cleanliness and a good nights’ sleep are among the best rewards attainable.

Appeals to Pathos

Beatings

Using a style of anti-blazon, Douglass also vividly explains several episodes of beatings in the narrative. A blazon is the name for a technique in which the author catalogues characteristics of a maiden usually working from her hair down. Each of these characteristics is compared in simile to something beautiful, or else used as a hyperbole (Baldick). Blazon can be traced back to Petrarch and his description of Laura, and it is important because it not only necessitates the introduction of a maiden, but the way in which a blazon describes parts of a whole gives a new perspective on the person being described. Not only is she a beautiful woman, a beautiful human being, but her eyes themselves are beautiful, as well as her lips and

her shape. At the end of a blazon, the sum of detailed parts provides a much different concept about the woman than simply introducing her as a whole person. Several well-known writers such as Jane Austen and William Shakespeare were able to “turn the convention upside down” in a tradition of satirically choosing the wrong person to blazon, or the wrong characteristics to emphasize (Jones, 69). In Shakespeare’s case he uses the right characteristics but with the wrong comparison at the other end of the simile; his sonnet 130 opens with the line “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.” In each of these cases of ‘anti-blazon,’ the author deliberately chooses the wrong elements in order to add to the overall satire. Douglass uses the same strategy to describe victims of the beatings.

While blazon emphasizes beauty and pristine-ness, Douglass’ anti-blazon emphasizes horror and gore. The first beating depicted in *Narrative* is that of Aunt Hester. Douglass refers to this as “the entrance to the hell of slavery through which [he] was about to pass”; in other words, viewing his first beating was a rite of passage for the young slave (4). Rather than describing Hester’s face and delicate features, he describes her neck, shoulders, and back. Because Aunt Hester is a working woman, the strength of her shoulders and back are more apt identifiers of her status than the delicate nature of her facial coloring might have been. Also, rather than describing these body parts as beautiful, Douglass describes them as blood covered and gashed. In this way, he has taken the well known convention and used it to his own ends.

Mary is the recipient of the next beating described in *Narrative*. Mary works as a slave for the family across the street from Douglass’ own employers in Baltimore. Douglass describes her as one of the most “mangled and emaciated creatures” he has ever seen (21). Furthermore, “the head, neck, and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress.”

(21). The gashed and festering head, neck, and shoulders serve almost as a synecdoche for Mary herself; for her master, Mary is nothing more than a set of parts which function together to perform work.

Next, Douglass describes his own little brother's beating. This one is not so much in line with the style of blazon, but it is gory. Douglass describes that Master Andrew, "took my little brother by the throat, threw him on the ground, and with the heel of his boot stamped upon his head till the blood gushed from his nose and ears" (28). This example is concise, but powerful. Perhaps the brevity of the description is due to the nonchalant nature of the actual abuse. Douglass describes Andrew's motive for beating the boy as merely to serve as an example of the way slaves in Andrew's possession ought to be treated.

The final two beatings Douglass describes are those between himself and Mr. Covey. These are decidedly different, because Douglass experiences them not as an outside observer but as a participant. In her analysis, Carson pays particular attention to the Douglass/Covey beatings as well.

In Mr. Covey's first violent encounter with Douglass, Douglass had been ordered to drive a team of cart-pulling oxen into the woods to collect firewood. When the oxen become scared, they crash into a gate, destroying the cart and spilling the contents. Douglass is nearly killed avoiding the crash. However, Mr. Covey tells Douglass he will teach his slave not to "trifle away my time and break gates" (35). Covey orders Douglass to remove his clothes and receive a whipping as punishment, but Douglass does not so much as gesture to remove his clothing in a refusal to accept punishment for the accident. Covey, in turn, rushes at Douglass, rips off his clothes, and beats him until he has worn through several wooden switches.

Douglass' description of this beating is more psychological and less physically descriptive; he explains his own innocence and Covey's unwillingness to listen to reason. Douglass appeals to pathos of his audience, not so much through the graphic description of the physical beating, but rather the harsh punishment for something out of his control. This scene depicts a different kind of entrapment than readers have previously read about: being stuck in a situation where no one will listen to or believe the things one has to say.

After this beating, Douglass runs away for the weekend and seeks council of an older slave, Sandy. Sandy proposes that Douglass carry a special root on his right side in order to protect him from ever being beaten by his master again (39). Douglass at first sees the suggestion as superstition and refuses, but Sandy earnestly insists and Douglass obliges by gathering some root from the woods on his way back to Covey's farm (39). Once Douglass does return to Covey's, he is not beaten, even though he had run away (40).

Shortly thereafter is the final incident between Mr. Covey and Frederick Douglass. This time, Covey comes upon Douglass in a sort of surprise attack while Douglass is tending to the horses. Douglass resolves to fight back and wins in the scuffle against both Covey and a slave named Hughes, whom Covey calls to his aid. This incident is the "turning point in [Douglass'] career as a slave" because he has started taking an active role in his own fate (43).

According to Carson, the importance of including the story about the root and the details of Douglass winning the final scuffle with Covey is to show that a slave required a mix of Christian religion and African superstition to survive slavery. She argues that because Douglass sees Sandy on a Sunday and receives the root, which is said to have magical powers, Douglass mixes the Christian Sabbath with African spirituality (Carson, 27). Furthermore, "through the

synthesis [of Christian and African tradition, that] Douglass gains his final liberation from Covey” (Carson, 28).

While it is true that Douglass does act differently after his weekend with Sandy, and that his psyche seems to have changed, I do not believe that his spirituality is completely altered, nor do I think that Douglass’ victory over Covey can be attributed to the root. Rather, Douglass’ win should be attributed to his visit with Sandy simply because he has gained confidence and has been allowed to confide in a friend and take a weekend reprieve on his own terms. His rejuvenation does have something to do with his visit to Sandy, but the ‘magic’ root is not the cause.

In addition, Douglass’ newfound confidence does not dissuade Covey from trying to tie up and beat him; Douglass’ violence does. Carson quotes Houston Baker as writing, “this displacement [of Christianity by African superstition] reveals the inefficacy of trusting solely to any form of extrasecular aid for relief (or release) from slavery. The root does not work. The physical confrontation does.” (Carson, 28). Douglass depicts both beating scenes to prove that slave owners like Covey will not listen or respond to reason, but will respond to violence. This is one more example of the dehumanizing characteristic of slavery; even the slave owners degrade their own humanity a level by involving themselves in the institution for so long. In the original scene where Douglass is beaten for breaking the ox cart, he first puts forth a logical explanation to the readers, from which any rational man would conclude Douglass’ innocence. But Covey still beats him, even after being relayed the same story which readers have read. This illustrates Covey’s lack of respect for truth and argument, and lack of compassion, in contrast to Douglass’ assumed audience. Covey, or for that matter Southern slave owners in general, is uncivil; he acts with violence and responds only to violence. In this example, Covey has

dehumanized himself and assumed brute mentality; not only does slavery dehumanize the slave, but also the master.

Douglass employs a rhetorical strategy of combining appeals to pathos with appeals to logos, which enables him to make quick anecdotes so meaningful. Each of these anecdotes about beatings is concise, but rich with meaning. The same can be said for the way Douglass deals with the next theme of blasphemy. He works on several levels at once, in order to make a larger impact. In the beating descriptions, Douglass obviously appeals to pathos with his gory depictions of human beings treated as work objects and the physical and psychological impact these beatings have on slaves. He also appeals to logos in that he outlines logical proof of his own innocence (even though that logic is ignored by the white men). With the following blasphemy examples, Douglass appeals to the pathos of slandering religion, and also to the logos of illogical argument used to support slaveholders' actions.

Blasphemy as Emotionally Wrong and Illogical

Douglass also uses the recurring theme of blasphemy and the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders to point out logical fallacies in perception. Over and over again, slave owners justify cruel and inhumane treatment of their slaves in the name of Christianity. Children are sold from their mothers, women are raped, people are beaten and it all happens because white men claim to be acting within their own God-given right over property.

Mr. Plummer was a drunk who beat Aunt Hester for running off with Lloyd's Ned, even though Plummer had put the two together in the first place (4). In this example, Plummer was over-indulgent in alcohol, beat another human being, cast judgment on a fellow sinner's actions, and did not initially respect the sanctity of Aunt Hester's virginity, all of which are sins

according to Christian doctrine. Nonetheless, Plummer is to be respected by slaves. Mr. Severe would beat his slaves and curse, using profanity in front of women and children and swearing oaths. Douglass says Severe made the plantation a “field of blood and of blasphemy.” (7). Slave owners in Baltimore consider as sin allowing slaves to read “in this Christian country,” and they shut down the slaves’ Sabbath schools, even though an education might let the slaves read the Bible and have a more personal relationship with God (23). The Auld family and other city slave owners pray for their own abundance and let slaves starve (31). Captain Auld’s conversion to Christianity makes him “more cruel and hateful in all his ways” (32). Douglass describes slave masters who whip their slaves while quoting scripture (“He that knoweth his master’s will and doeth it not shall be beaten with many stripes”) even though, according to the Bible, God is to be a man’s master (33). This theme continues throughout the entire work and toward the end, Douglass says, “Religion of the South is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes” which is a summary of his entire view of the blasphemed version of Christianity practiced by slave owners (46).

Douglass does, however, believe in spirituality and in the God of Christianity. At several points throughout *Narrative*, Douglass praises God. For example, he cites Divine Intervention as the force which brings him to Baltimore (19). Also, he writes, “the good spirit never left me. I praise God.” (19). He believes that Providence brings him to Miss Lucretia when all of the slaves and property are divided from a larger estate and split between siblings (28). Douglass believes in a good God, who is powerful and can cause things to happen. The Providence to which he refers is an active force in his life. These positive depictions of spirituality are in stark contrast to the negative and blasphemous depictions of warped Christianity practiced by slave owners.

Good spirituality serves not only as an antithetical opposition to the slave owners' Christianity, but it also proves Douglass' own ultimate belief in God.

Carson points to this belief in Providence as a reason why Douglass does not call for abolitionist action from his audience. She writes that "he grounds his assertions of self in the authority of God, and trusts his own religious experience as against that of white Christians" (Carson, 23). Rather than simply relying on Providence, Douglass roots his argument in a dichotomy of personal action and God's support. Carson argues that Douglass' mere willingness to identify himself as a leader supported by God is radical enough to prove a point in support of his cause. In this argument, Douglass does not have to call an audience to action, because he is already functioning as a bold leader, whose actions should be modeled.

Douglass does root his argument in his own credibility, but I believe his ethos is made up of more than just the religious/spiritual; he also has a logical command of language and reason which work in his favor. Because Douglass is able to use both pathos and logos to build the argument of *Narrative*, Douglass is able to reach his audience on a number of levels. Much of his logical argumentation style seems to be influenced by his outside reading.

Appeals to Ethos: Academic Influences

Douglass' rhetorical foundation for the argument presented in *Narrative* draws support from his childhood reading. At around the age of 12, Douglass comes upon a copy of *The Columbian Orator*³, which he finds most interesting and in which he finds two successful dialogs on the escape from oppression toward freedom (23). The first is the play "Slaves in Barbary,"

³ *The Columbian Orator* is a compilation of speeches, plays, and texts, which demonstrate persuasive strategies. The full title is *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces, Together with Rules, Calculated to Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence*.

about slaves sold at auction. The second is a speech given by O'Conner in 1795 to the House of Commons, in favor of Ireland's emancipation⁴ (Bingham, 243).

In the "Slaves of Barbary," Teague, a slave up for auction presents an argument to Hamet, a wealthy man at the auction. Hamet himself was once a slave because of debts owed. When Teague refuses to cooperate in being sold, Hamet gives him audience to speak. Teague basically tells Hamet that it is hard enough being a sailor and trying to earn a livelihood; he does not believe he has done anything wrong and sees it unnecessary to go into slavery. In a monologue, Teague presents his full argument according to the following steps. First, establish Christianity as the main moral rulebook. Second, suggest that heaven's eternal judgment will be against the soul of any man involved in slavery. Third, argue that if men were meant to be masters and slaves, they would be born with either a whip or fetters but men are not born with these things, so God must have created us equally. Fourth, point out that God has also supplied all men with "a pair of jaws" and the ability to speak and they should therefore speak freely, regardless of status (114). Fifth, point out the blasphemy involved in taking part in slavery at all. Finally, take a personal moral stance against slavery, but allow the audience (here, Hamet) to make a decision based on Teague's reasoning.

This line of argumentation is particularly important to Douglass, who follows all of these steps in *Narrative*. First, he assumes Christianity as his own moral guide and references it in relation to all the characters mentioned as well as the audience. Then he points out inconsistencies with assumptions that slavery as an institution makes sense. He calls into question why he should be treated differently than white boys. Then Douglass points to so much

⁴ While O'Conner's speech does deal with escape of a people from oppression, the speaker is not a part of the group being emancipated, so his position is much different than Douglass'. I will not elaborate on this example because these two contexts are so different and it is difficult to detect any parallels between O'Conner's rhetorical strategies and those employed by Douglass.

blasphemy committed by slave owners. Finally, he voices his moral opposition to slavery, but never explicitly asks the audience to follow suit. It is as if he uses Teague's monologue as a formula for the entire narrative.

Although it works well as an argument in *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass' choice to conclude his argument in the same way Teague does in the play seems not altogether appropriate. In the play, Hamet is familiar with slavery and can already empathize with Teague's plight. Many of Douglass' readers are free people from the North, who are not familiar with slavery and might not be able to empathize with the experience of a slave. Also, if Douglass is speaking out for the abolitionist cause, peculiarly he does not include a thesis statement that slavery is evil and should be done away with. Nor does he include a call to action for his readers. Why does Douglass choose to leave this narrative open ended?

The End: Why No Thesis?

Douglass leaves a trail of logical and emotional breadcrumbs for a discerning audience to pick up, perhaps trusting that blasphemous, ignorant slaveholders will not pick up on the treachery he is creating by persuading audiences of logical, compassionate people to abolish slavery. First, he gives graphic examples of beatings and the dehumanizing characteristics of slavery. Then, he writes about his attempt to persuade his master verbally (41) and the futility of this interaction because of the slaveholder's unwillingness to listen to reason. Next, he writes about his persuasion of Mr. Covey using violence and how this worked only because Covey respected brute force (42-3). Then he starts to use his tactic of presence⁵ on the readers

⁵ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tytecha's theory of audience includes the idea that making an idea present to the audience results in an emotional connection. According to Herrick, "The presence of a fact or an idea is almost a sensory experience rather than a purely rational one" (Herrick, 211). Successful rhetors can make an audience feel present with that idea.

themselves. He writes, “It would astonish one, unaccustomed to slaveholding life, to see with what wonderful ease a slaveholder can find things, of which to make occasion to whip a slave” (46). Here, he is hoping that these graphic examples will indeed astonish his own audience. He goes on to question why a righteous God would not just “smite the oppressors” who are slaveholders (48). With all of the obvious blasphemy he has illustrated on behalf of the slaveholders as a background to this point, any truly pious person would also want to smite the oppressors. By using the word righteous, Douglass appeals to what he considers to be real Christians. People who would agree about blasphemy being deplorable are the type to recognize themselves as righteous. These are the same type of people who will agree that God should be one’s only master and that He should do away with oppressors. If God would want it, God’s righteous followers should also want it. Here, without ever expressly writing it, Douglass has planted a seed for his Christian audience that slavery is an affront to God, so they should hate it too.

Using a style that we would currently define as creative nonfiction, Douglass uses description to show, not tell, and creates an open text in which the audience is allowed to draw their own conclusion. The Mere Exposure media theory suggests that the more audience participation required in reaching a conclusion, the more likely consumers of the message are to agree with this conclusion. The real genius, however, is that Douglass begins to use this tactic on us from the beginning, then shows several examples of using it on other people, before finally making an obvious use of these tactics on his readers. He persuades the other slaves to join his cause of abolishing slavery (at least slave status for themselves) not by arguing explicitly, but by showing them his point of view through example or “impressing [fellow slaves] with the inhumanity of slavery” (50). Douglass trusts that his audience will make the conclusion that

slavery should be abolished if only they understand the harsh cruelty truly involved in it. By showing example after example of brutal beatings, inhumane treatment, transgressions against nature and blasphemy against God's true teachings, Douglass makes a case that slavery is an awful thing. The next step he wants readers to make for themselves is that slavery ought to be abolished. Here, he is employing enthymeme⁶, because if the readers all accept that horrible things ought not continue, and he presents slavery as a horrible thing, then slavery ought not continue.

In the end, I have several hypotheses about why Douglass may have chosen to omit a specific call to action:

1. Perhaps he leaves this enthymeme open because he trusts the intelligence and common sense of his audience to connect the dots.
2. Perhaps he does so because it makes so much sense to him that he would not even consider having to expressly state the middle step.
3. Perhaps enthymeme is a clever tactic in his own strategy of persuasion, particularly if he intends the rhetorical value behind Mere Exposure Theory.
4. Perhaps Douglass knows the nuances of his status as a free black man and understands it to be safer to explain facts to a free white audience than to tell them to change or even appear to persuade them to change. He understands kairos and the limitations of his ethos.

⁶ Enthymeme is an Aristotelian device in which the rhetor makes a logical syllogism, but can skip the middle step because it is commonly accepted knowledge among the audience. It is used when an argument must be set up with some background information and then a conclusion is given. The audience's cultural understanding will allow them to readily recognize the connection from A to C without having to hear B. For example, "All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates must be mortal" is a syllogism. The same argument can be stated, "If All men are mortal, then Socrates must be mortal" because people know that Socrates is a man. The latter is an enthymeme.

He does tell us that it would be imprudent for a slave to suggest to his master that farm tasks be done in an alternative manner and he also recognizes it to be imprudent for a black man (free or not) to suggest anything to a white man about a change in behavior or institution: “Does he ever venture to suggest a different mode of doing things from that pointed out by his master? He is indeed presumptuous and getting above himself; nothing less than a flogging will do for him” (47). I believe that Douglass is too smart for assumption 2, and it is instead his rhetorical choice not to explicitly state a thesis is largely a combination of 3 and 4.

Kenneth Burke, author of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, states, nearly 100 years after Douglass’ *Narrative* was published, “...rhetorical language is inducement to action (or to attitude, attitude being an incipient act).” (Burke, 42). Frederick Douglass was playing into this same idea when he wrote and published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845. He used rhetorical strategies to induce audiences to action, without ever explicitly saying “Become an abolitionist.” Douglass was able to do this so successfully—to construct his own ethos—because he focused on attitude change by winning both the hearts and minds of his audience with pathos and logos. His pathos appeals depicted a cruel, gruesome, lonely, and ‘dehumanized’ lifestyle endured by slaves every day. His logos appeals poked holes in the logic of slavery as an institution and pointed out inconsistencies and hypocrisy on the part of slave owners. His entire argument was couched in Christian ideology and a hope for true love of God as opposed to hypocritical justifications for sinful acts. Because Douglass included all of this in his succinct *Narrative*, he was able to win over the attitudes of his audience, and if he believed as Burke that attitude is incipient to action, then his rhetoric brings his audience to the precipice of action, and his job as an abolitionist is done.

While Carson provides some explanations based on theological foundations of Douglass' argument, she fails to account for Douglass' influences other than religion. Douglass makes a point to write about his experience reading the *Columbian Orator*, and in fact, the very text he mentions is useful in explaining rhetorical strategies in *Narrative*. Douglass uses logical fallacies and emotional appeals to illustrate the dehumanizing and hypocritical characteristics of slavery. By systematically picking apart the logos and pathos of slavery as an institution, and making present to his audience the realities of life for a slave, Douglass is able to persuade his audience to adopt a mindset against the institution of slavery. He appeals to that which we consider to make us human: our ability to reason and capacity to empathize. Douglass does not have to ask his readers to do this; his writing is so inspiring that we simply do it anyway. Where a text is so rich with presence, in an instance where life and death is at stake for the forthright writer, no explicit thesis is necessary to build an argument against the institution of slavery.

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